

THE METAMORPHOSIS (or PHRONESIS)

By Antoinette Cooper

Lying in bed I grow uncomfortable at how bone presses against bone. The pain of kneecaps grinding against one another in child's pose made sleep impossible the night before. I have not stepped on a scale lately, have no energy to take more than a few steps a day, but somehow know that I must have spent weeks wasting away. The only time it felt good to laugh was when I put on a once-tight skirt only to watch it slowly slouch down to my ankles while finding no frame to hold onto. I am no more, and yet I marvel at how the body has become so determined to live, even when the soul starts to dream of that other place. I am not sure who will greet me on the other side—maybe the mothers—but I know I no longer feel welcome in this pain body.

My husband gently lifts me out of bed, taking breaks to let me adjust the pelvic weight of my watermelon-size tumor so that I can walk to the bathroom. Today is the day I am scheduled to have surgery, and in honor of the occasion I thought it best to shower. Everything hurts. Even the warm streams of water on my skin feel like punishment, and when the torture of touch is over, I declare myself ready.

There is nothing that could have prepared me for traversing the New York City streets. The city is too bustling with life to welcome someone like me, someone who walks with death. Every pothole is an atom bomb inside of me. Every red light, a personal attack. Every taxi driver in a rush towards life, a slap in the face. I close my eyes and hum Old Negro Spirituals hoping that the ancestors hear in the silences that I too am ready to come home. *I wanna be ready. / I wanna be ready. / I wanna be ready.*

When I arrive at the hospital, I notice how the pace of life continues to speed past. Doctors speak at my body. My hand signs papers, as though she has authority to give away organs if they determine the tumor is cancerous. I am asked every question except how I am doing. I am scared. I am no more.

My husband says that when I woke from my drugged sleep, I hummed before I could speak. A low hum that connected me to a time before language. Speaking in tongues. And when I spoke, to the living, my first words were that I'd been split in half. And when I saw the metal that held my lower half intact with my upper half, I cried out that I was a monster.

Antoinette Cooper, who was born in Jamaica and raised in the New York City Projects, is a writer and TEDx speaker. She holds an MFA from Columbia University, and in 2020 founded Black Exhale, a space for the liberated Black body.